

Rearing Of Our Children - The Need for Serious Reform

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Children are the inestimable assets of humanity [*Puttā vatthu manussānam*]. Perhaps it is only those that are made to come into this world with adequate seriousness, responsibility and accountability, particularly in these days of *in vitro* fertilization [ivf.], test-tube babies and cloning as well as unmarried mothers. We are sad to be driven to make such a statement which could be misjudged as being uncharitable. These remarks about children, let it be remembered by our planners, are the terms in which Buddhist thinking speaks of children in relation to the rest of mankind. We drag in here planners and policy-makers straight-away because, in spite of serious notes of warning struck by some of the top men at the London School of Economics decades ago that **'those who plan for a country or for a people must hold themselves responsible for the consequences of their plans in their implementation'**, planners even today seem to be lured more by the applause [and perhaps the remuneration?] they get from those who commission them than from the successful results of their proposals for the benefit of mankind.

Yet another point. Most leadership in the developing countries, particularly Asia, think it very progressive to be dressed in public in trendy clichés of the world today like human rights and women's liberation, which are being brandished globally for many other reasons, much more than for their intrinsic humane considerations. Letting our women to be exploited at home mercilessly under our very eyes, by various grades of people in our own society like cruel husbands, unscrupulous employers or tycoons, both men and women of sex trading agencies, there is little lip service we can pay to the worldwide women's lib. When we try to assess our present, we need to have an awareness of what we have really said and done in the past, sometimes near sometimes distant,

and if there is any real deterioration in the present, attempt a genuine detection and diagnosis of the present malaise and work for its cure and prevention.

It is no secret that quite a number of industrialization projects in recent years at rural level, and that in fulfillment of election promises made, have disproportionately brought about many social problems like unmarried mothers and abortions or fatherless homes. All these for the sake of politically visualized economic balancing, both at domestic and at state levels. But let it be remembered that this is quite a price to pay. These are really not problems to be picked up by the way side by sharp-eyed gentlemen who sit as commissioners but by planners, well ahead of events while they are still at their paper work. Built-in air bags in motor cars in the new way alone cannot prevent the disastrous consequences of reckless driving.

This is why we seriously take up this question of rearing children, children who are going to be the responsible and accountable men and women of tomorrow. Even in an age like the present where test-tube babies and in-vitro-fertilization are everyday realities, let us admit that mothers have not only to bear children after impregnation, but also rear them at some stage after delivery. Increasingly women are now refusing to do this. We have reached a stage today when some women in fact ask the question whether they are bearing their own children or of somebody else. Both legally and socially, this question is becoming, for very many reasons, a very real one.

In Buddhist sociological analysis human society is meaningfully fragmented and we arrive at the family as its smallest working unit. It is commonly identified as a three-tiered one, with the actively serving mother and father at the centre, the children below and the grandparents right above. In Buddhism, the extended family is thus recognized and accepted. The responsibility of running the family well is primarily vested in the young father and mother, who it is assumed have begot their children of their own choice and seeking and certainly are not called upon to do so from anywhere above. One cannot afford to ignore or distort this basic Buddhist pattern of family structuring. In-laws are smoothly woven into the

picture thereafter. Young girls who go from one home into another to inaugurate another new one are more than adequately instructed on this subject by the Buddha himself in the Kosala Samyutta with these precise words ***sassu-devā patibbatā*** which require respectful relationships with the in-laws and one's husband [SN. I p. 86]. This social structuring is presented again with the same precision in Sigāla Sutta where a young householder is admonished by the Buddha to give one's parents pride of place in the home by placing them in the eastern region [***mātā-pitā disā pubbā***]. One's wife and children are placed right opposite to them in the western region [***putta-dārā disā pacchā*** DN. III. p.191f.].

Identifying the mother and father who are required to occupy the central position in the family as its hub, Buddhism lays down many instructions clarifying their specific roles. 1. Mother and father in the home are to be the highest symbol of veneration by the children [***āhuneyyā ca puttānaṃ***]. Therefore they are called Brahmā [***Brahmā ' ti mātā-pitaro***]. 2. Parents in themselves are an emblem of love in their relations to the children, with love [***mettā***], compassion [***karuṇā***], appreciative joy [***muditā***] and equanimity [***upekkhā***]. They are also called 'sympathizers of their progeny' [***pajāya anukampakā***]. 3. In their educative role, they are called the 'first teachers' or *pubbācariyā* [***pubbācariyā ' ti vuccare***]. This is a position on which the greatest educationists in the western world are agreed upon. For they say that the education of a child begins at 0 [zero], i.e. almost at birth or on the mother's lap. What better corroboration of the wisdom of the past [and of the east] from the researches of the present [and of the west]. For this same reason parents are also described as 'guides who show their children the world' [***imassa lokassa dassetāro***. For all these references see AN. I. p.132]. What a wealth of guidelines for parents who really wish to take care of their children for their healthy growth within the human community.

From here we move over to another very sophisticated area of child care in which Buddhist thinking reflects complete mastery and thorough competence. The chapter on this [AN. II.p.32] is titled 'the four segments of care and contribution towards children' [***cattāri saṅgaha-vatthūni*** or in Sinhala ***satara***

saṅgraha vastu - for the benefit of our locals who need to learn a little more]. Four different items, namely provision of needs [*dāna*], pleasant speaking [*peyyavajja*], wise counseling and guidance [*attha-cariyā*] and emotional mobility between parents and children [*samānattatā*] are listed as determinants which bring about respectful relations between parents and children [*ibid.*]. We are inclined to take this text as a special injunction to parents for the successful upbringing of children whereby they foster and safeguard the proper parent-child relationship. For our text says that if these virtues were not prevalent in society, i.e. among humans [*ete ca saṅgahā nāssu*], then neither mother nor father could expect any honour or respect from their children [*na mātā puttakāraṇā labhetha mānaṃ pūjaṃ vā na pitā puttakāraṇā*]. But we are very much surprised that the Commentary on this takes no notice of this parental aspect and presents them as general social virtues, applicable to all and sundry.

In marked contrast to these words of wisdom of the ancients with regard to children in the human community, we hear today of street kids, of boys and girls who for the greater part of the day since leaving home in morning, are neither in the school to which they are destined nor in their own homes where they belong. They hang around all manner of dens, gambling, drug etc. where they seek to gratify the new needs they have acquired in their own society and to satiate their unending appetites. In big cities, out in the world, we have seen the daily records going up to ten thousand lost kids. Some among them, like drug addicts, have to turn elsewhere to find the necessary money. The boys consequently turn out to be juvenile delinquents and resort to all manner of violent crimes like burglaries, high-jacking and highway robberies. Teenage girls of tender age are seen taking to prostitution, ending up in multiple tragedies of being victims of sexually transmitted diseases [STD], being severe drug addicts and being unmarried mothers of unwanted children.

This last item of unwanted children is pushing humanity, even in what we want to believe to be the beautiful country of Sri Lanka, to the most convenient mode of disposal of garbage, namely abortion, an act which the elitist society of

today is wrapping up in velvet for their own convenience. But in most cases, a simple probe into the circumstances under which it is done, both by the high and the low, would reveal its utter vulgarity, brutality and criminality. Do we allow a vociferous minority of men and women in our society, no matter what academic or official positions they hold, to browbeat others on these issues? In 1997, and we know this for certain, large numbers of teenage girls in Melbourne came out in the streets to present the other side of the story. They pleaded with pregnant women at abortion clinics to hold their patience, and to allow the child within them to live and grow up, undertaking completely the upbringing of the child on its arrival in this world.

These are the doings of our own children, driven to these vulgar acts of violence and crime, because they have lost their bearings in the home. Whom do we then have to blame? If in our country there is such a thing as '**law enforcement authority**', which is well recognized and effectively used elsewhere, then we should be a little more sensitively aware of the increasing crime rate in our own country. A well run home should always guarantee the social equilibrium in the country at large. For the citizens would have learnt their first lessons quite well at home. Let us take a closer look again at the four areas of child care we indicated above. If they were strictly adhered to and parental obligations duly and dutifully fulfilled, then it is very unlikely that we would discover many areas of our society warped and withered. Our children, the future citizens of tomorrow, would not be found **painfully maimed** and **irreparably wounded** for **want of real domestic love from their parents**. This is the most tragic area where we find most delinquency being generated for want of love for the younger from the older.

In our fourfold list, we had *dāna* or provision of items of food and clothing which are to be found by the parents for their children. This, we presume is the first and basic item of child care which any society should be careful to provide without serious omission. That gives the children the necessary sense of security which they need in their growing up days. They feel that their presence in the home is adequately recognized and accepted. Even if the state does provide the

funding for these, the basic needs of food and clothing must literally come from the hands of the parents. And we would emphasize that it should be in a way that children sense it and feel it. It could not be like feeding rats with peanuts through a slot machine or conveyor belt. We feel that this aspect of physical involvement and commitment is not adequately felt and recognized by most parents today.

The second item in our list of *peyya-vajja* or loving words to children adds further lubricants to the process of child management in the home. It must be emphasized and equally well carefully noted that neither the one nor the other of these two could replace each other. Here again not only should parents find time for these good acts of child rearing but also should go through shorter or longer periods of apprenticeship for these if one has not had the good fortune of acquiring these during one's own childhood. Please look back and ask yourself the question and seek answers with honesty. The truth is that those who have not had it given to them cannot learn to give it to others.

As children grow up and move into a world of complicated activity, the ability to choose from becomes a vital ingredient of the living process. At each stage, the children might feel not quite equal to the task of choosing. They would look around for guidance, consciously or otherwise. This is the time that wise and conscientious parents need to be available to them. If parents do not, for whatever valid or invalid reason make themselves available, the children have to turn elsewhere, in some other direction. For a drowning man catches at a straw, they say. Ye parents, lament not if peer pressure gathers a bumper harvest out of your children at this stage. Lots of devil's agents can put ideas into their heads. This is why the Buddhist list of *saṅgaha vastu* offers *attha-cariyā* or counseling as the third item at this stage. Parents must obviously be older than their children. Children can never be too old to learn from their parents, if only both parties approach the problem with sanity and the necessary humility.

Finally, our fourth item provides a very vital slot in the growth of the emotional life of humans. It is referred to as *samānattatā*. We would choose to translate this term as emotional mobility. It is explained as the parental ability to

meet their children at whatever emotional level into which they are plunged from time to time, happiness or grief, pleasure or pain [*sukha-dukkha*]. These are invariable experiences in the life of everyone. To feel with confidence that there are others in the family, especially one's parents, who rise up to one's level whether upwards or downwards, must necessarily be a great stabilizer in one's life. In such situations, it must be a source of great comfort to find persons who willingly obliterate differences and choose to meet as equals. It should be appreciated that the concept of *brahma-vihāra* in Buddhism is calculated to move people in this same direction.

It has been our endeavour here to spotlight from the world scene segments of crisis situations into which children slip in time and again. Sri Lanka comes in well within these. It is also agreed upon at world level that unpardonable lapses at domestic level, in the hands of parents, lead to these deteriorations and breakdowns. Unexpectedly early arrivals of children on the one hand, and unwanted arrivals on the other, specially at times when parents are not economically and emotionally sound enough to provide for children lead to these catastrophes. In the home, the search for money becomes the main driving force behind the family. Thinking on lines of women's lib and feminist activists also drive women out of homes in search money for their own economic independence [in most cases], leading to the emotional deterioration of their children through inexcusable lack of care and concern. One would feel that the impact of such lapses are felt much more in our part of the world. But we know for certain that in many English speaking countries elsewhere, even governments, with a lot of good judgement in their heads, recommend that women take up jobs with lesser work hours and return home early to be back with their children. Everywhere, a new vision is now being generated to foster better parent-child relationships.

We suspect that in this part of the world, through much whipping up by the media and the grandiloquence of pundits from everywhere, we have really jumped the gun in our social behaviour. It is so in the homes, for example, where

parents are no more than country cousins who arrange birthday parties for their teenage daughters between the hours of 10.00 p.m. and 2.00 a.m. Parents also either think or are being advised to keep away from the scene of such get-togethers for the entire duration.

Society of today has often thoughtlessly generated situations which prevent parents from not being available for the fulfillment of such obligations as we have discussed above. Mismanaged theories of domestic economics rank foremost as trouble-makers in this area. The equation now stands as more money to spend on home management equals less time to spend on the care of children. Experience through a very wide range of time and place has proved that these two items of money to spend and care of children cannot and should not be put on the same equation. Parents cannot afford to borrow from the one to pay the other. Very staggering figures of bankruptcy and indebtedness would be the lamentable result.

May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.